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The Mediation: Maternal Warmth to Children's Empathy through Maternal Responsiveness to Distress and Children's Disclosure



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Introduction

- Empathy has long been considered as a crucial contributor to (promoting) interpersonal sensitivity and social competence
- Empathy could contribute to migrant children's mental health (Au, 2011)
- Researches highlight the importance in the family environment to promote children's empathy:
 - Parental Warmth (Zhou et al., 2002)
 - Parental Responsiveness to Distress (Davidov et al., 2006; Grusec et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013)
 - Parent-Child Interaction (Tong et al., 2012 and Yoo et al., 2013)
- The emotion-related parenting practices (e.g., parental expression of emotion, reactions to children's emotions) provide a pathway to understanding the process through warmth to children's empathy (Zhou et al., 2002)
- Children's Disclosure (to parents)
 - Refers to the act of volunteering information about thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Sherman, 2010)
 - Is a special form of parent-child interaction
 - Can be viewed as an interacting process (Kerr et al., 2012)

Objective

- Investigate the link from maternal warmth to children's empathy
- Rethink about some seemingly contradicting results in the literature
 - Zhou et al. (2002) suggested parental warmth promotes children's empathy
 - Davidov et al. (2006) found parental responsiveness to distress rather than parental warmth predicts children's empathy
- Key observations:
 - Zhou et al. (2002) incorporated parental expression of emotion, but not parental responsiveness to distress
 - Davidov et al. (2006) studied the unique part of warmth after controlling the effect of responsiveness to distress
 - Neither of them considered children's disclosure
- We'll investigate the path from maternal warmth to children's empathy in the presence of maternal responsiveness to distress and children's disclosure

Methods

- Participants
 - 169 migrant children ($M = 9.31$, $SD = .55$); The survey was conducted in classroom
- Measures
 - Maternal Warmth: Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Lai, 2009; Rohner et al., 1994).
 - Responsiveness to Distress: Revised Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Questionnaire (Hughes et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2013)
 - Children's Disclosure: Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman et al., 1985; Lai, 2009)
 - Children's Empathy: Empathic, Prosocial Response to Another's Distress Scale (Davidov et al., 2006; Zhang, 2012)

Results

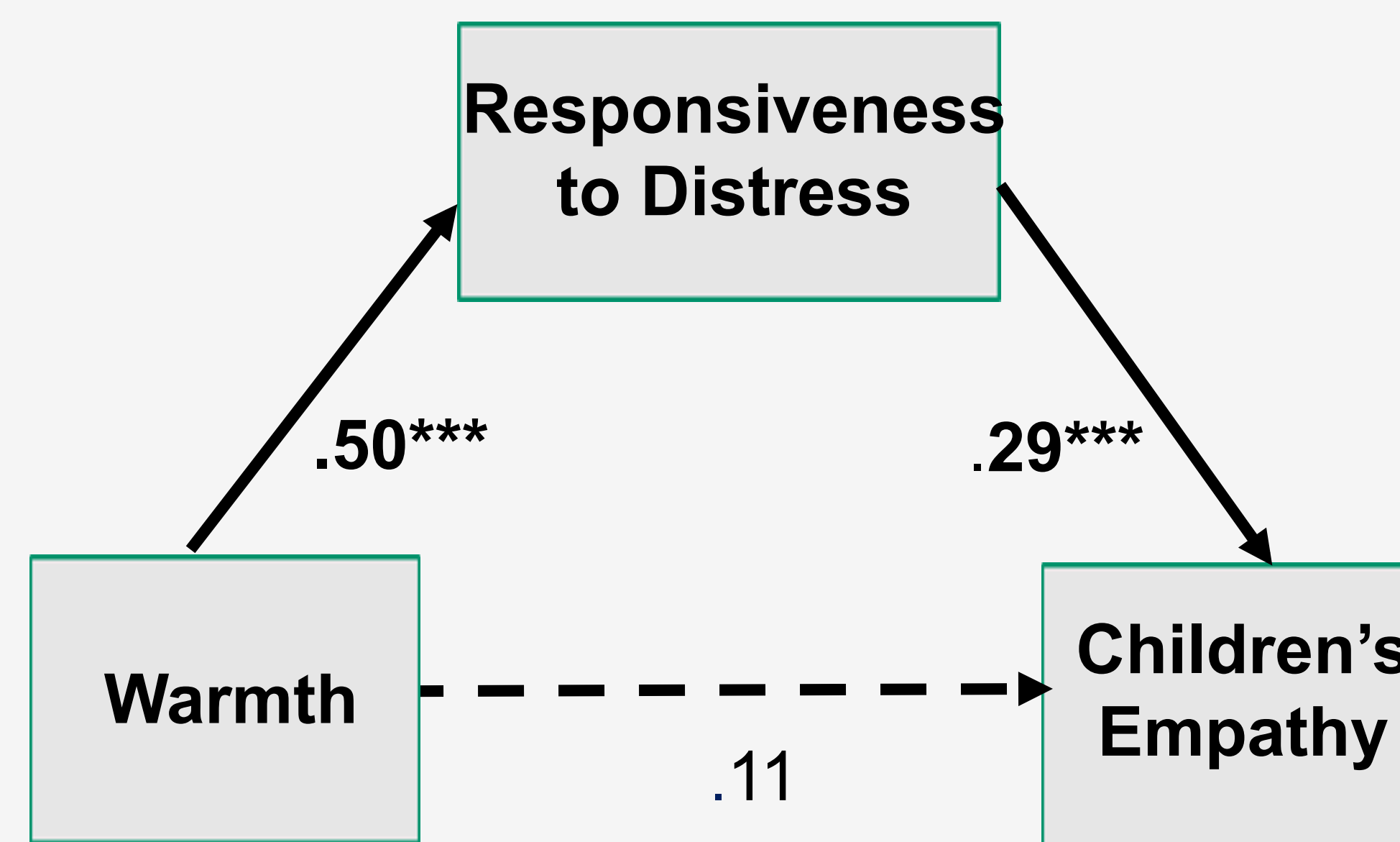


Fig. 1: (Maternal) Responsiveness to distress completely mediates the relationship between (maternal) warmth and children's empathy

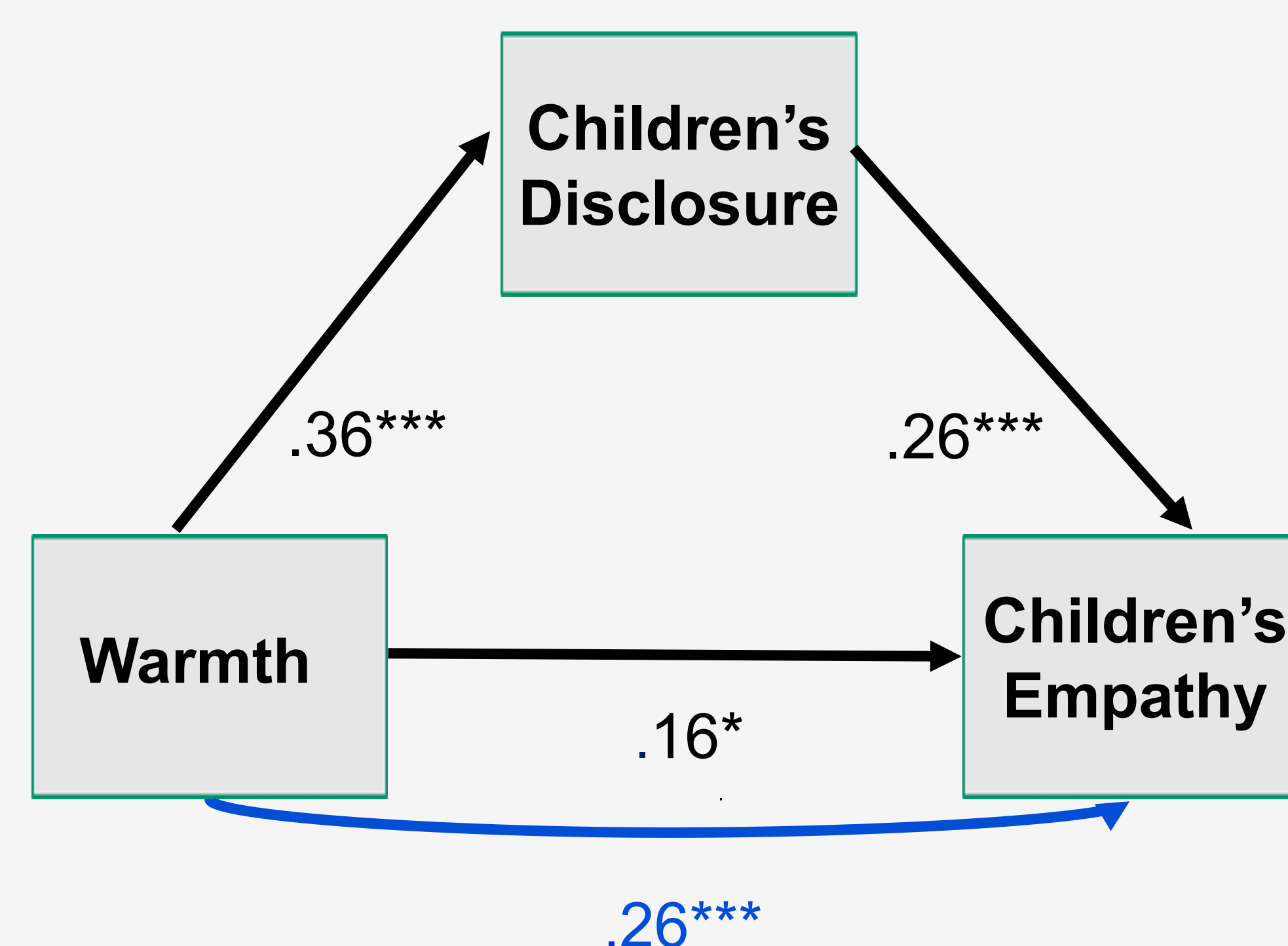


Fig. 2: Children's disclosure (to mother) partially mediates the relationship between (maternal) warmth and empathy; The blue arrow and coefficient are for the direct path from warmth to empathy (i.e., without children's disclosure)

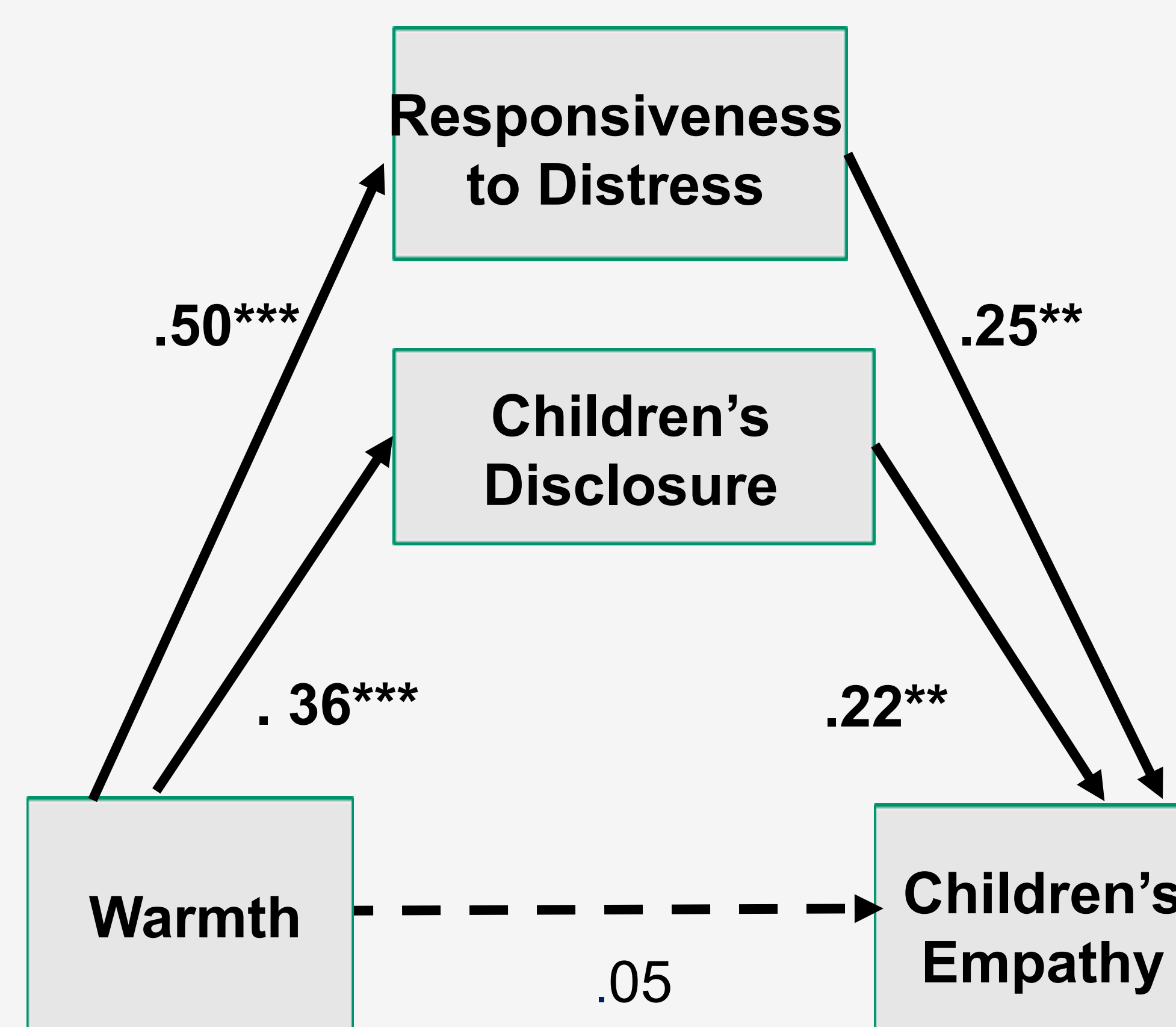


Fig. 3: (Maternal) Responsiveness to distress and children's disclosure (to mother) mediate the relationship between (maternal) warmth and children's empathy

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

- Reconciles previous findings in the literature
 - Responsiveness to distress overshadows maternal warmth (Fig. 1), as argued in Davidov et al., 2006
 - In the absence of responsiveness to distress, maternal warmth *does exhibit* influence on children's empathy directly or via children's disclosure which partially mediates (Fig. 2), as suggested in Zhou et al., 2002
- Significance of this work
 - Reveals more about the mechanism by which maternal warmth exerts (positive) influence on children's empathy
 - Meets the need to study the applicability of related theories to less developed countries among early grade-school children from low SES group

Conclusion

- Warmth could predict empathy through responsiveness to distress. In fact, responsiveness to distress plays a more important role than maternal warmth in terms of fostering children's empathy, in that it (almost) completely mediates the latter two
- Maternal warmth could affect children's empathy directly or in the presence of, say children's disclosure, a form of parent-child interaction
- Improving the bidirectional interaction between parent and children is beneficial

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